



A “Community of Communities” Approach to Youth Ministry

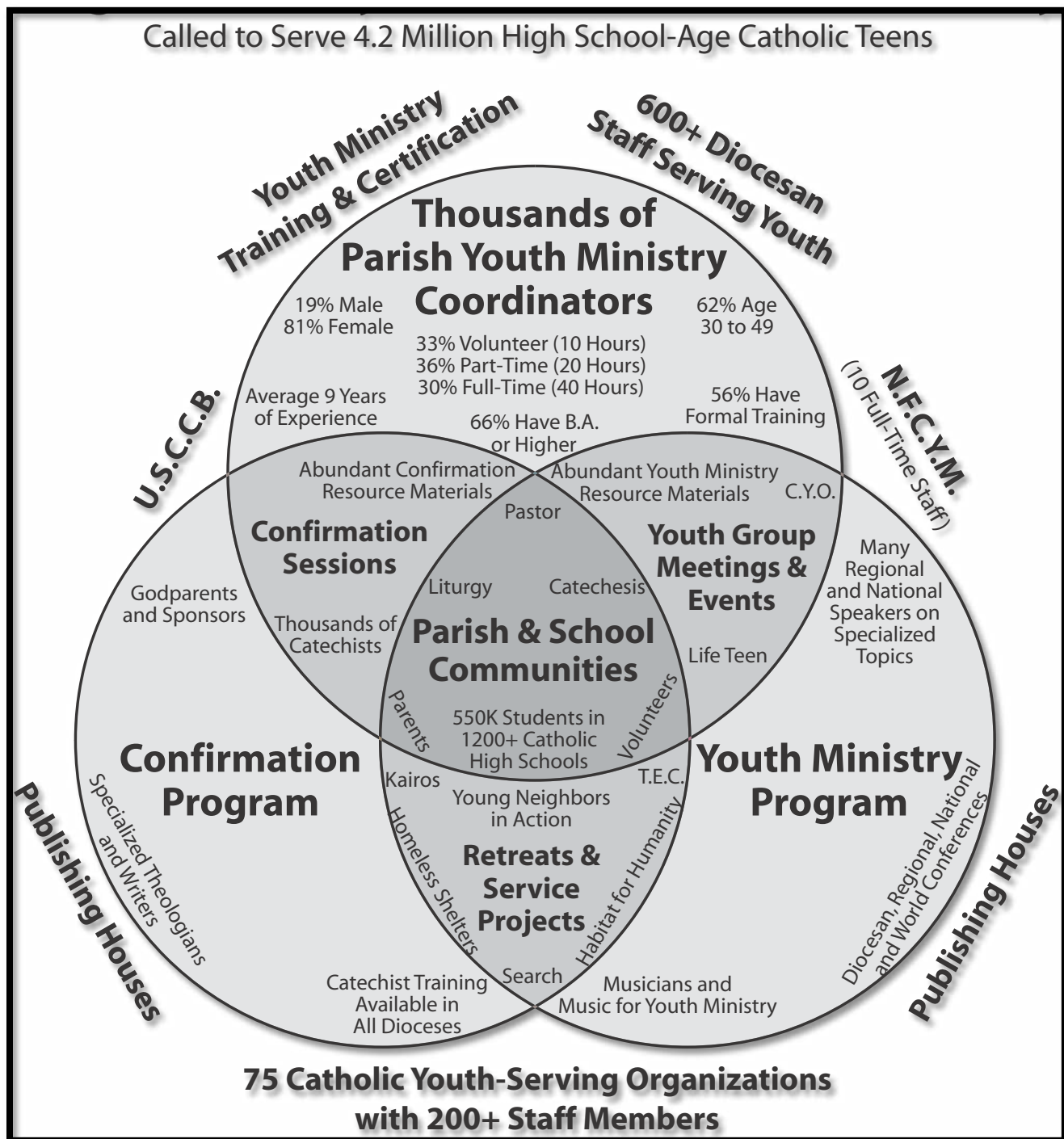
Ken Johnson-Mondragon with Ed Lozano

In 2005, when the National Study of Youth and Religion published *Soul Searching*, for the first time it became possible to measure the reach of Catholic youth ministry in a scientific way. Many pastors and youth ministers were disconcerted to find that only 24% of Catholic youth were participating in parish youth groups—far short of the 52% average among Protestant teens and 72% in Mormon communities (Smith and Donovan, 51). It is undoubtedly true that the renewal of Catholic youth ministry in the last 40 years has produced a rich ecosystem of parish youth ministry leaders and catechists, formation programs, practical resources, Confirmation programs, support services, ecclesial movements, and specialized, dynamic speakers for diocesan, regional and national events (Diagram 1). Nevertheless, one must ask the question: regardless of how many components are integrated into our programming, can we really call our youth ministries “comprehensive” if they are leaving 76% of our Catholic adolescents unserved?

In some ways, the low level of participation among Catholic youth should come as no surprise. There are currently 17,644 parishes in the United States,¹ called to serve a population of about 4.2 million high school-age teens who identify themselves as Catholic.² That means the *average* parish has about 240 Catholic adolescents living within its boundaries. In California, the parishes are even larger, with the average parish called to serve 1,000 youth and some very large parishes having as many as 3,000 Catholic adolescents—yet most youth ministers are delighted if they are reaching between 50 and 80 high school students each year. Simply put, few parish youth ministries are structured in a way that would make it feasible to involve even half of their parish’s adolescent members.

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Diagram 1: Ecosystem of Catholic Youth Ministry



The “Community of Communities” Approach

This is where a “community of communities” approach can expand the reach of the parish’s youth ministry over time. Pope John Paul II said that when the parish is seen as a community of communities and movements, it becomes “possible to live communion more intensely... In such a human context, it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word, and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ.” Similarly, the inadequacy of trying to gather a large and diverse youth community into one youth group was highlighted at the First National Encounter for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry:

The leaders in *Pastoral Juvenil*, Hispanic ministry, and mainstream youth and young adult ministry are increasingly aware that the programs and activities of the mainstream culture do not attract the full participation of Hispanic adolescents and *jóvenes*, even though they may speak English. This occurs due to economic, cultural, educational, geographic, and linguistic differences between the young people, especially when the parish ministry is limited to a single youth group. (33)

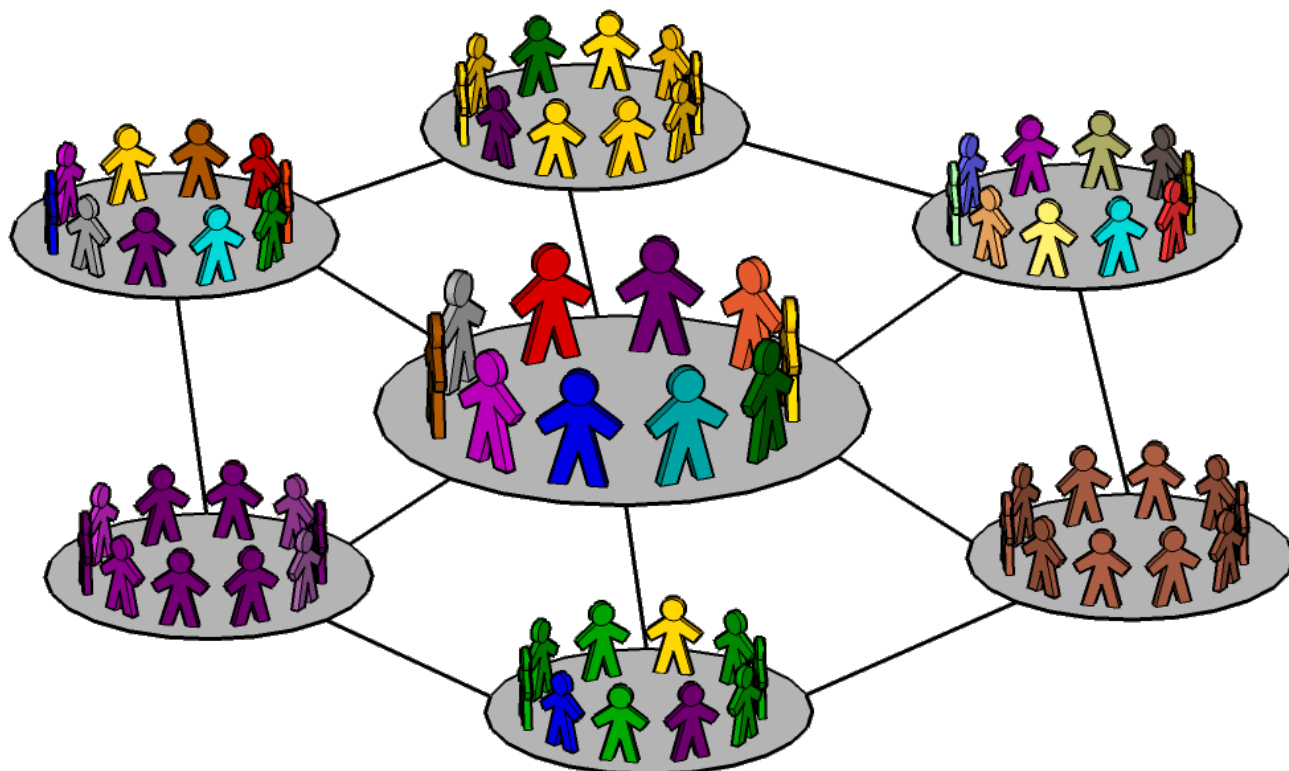
In a community of communities approach, the paid or designated volunteer youth ministry leader (YML) in the parish chairs a core team that consists of adult coordinators and key youth leaders who oversee each of the youth ministries or small communities. This approach is very helpful in linguistically diverse youth communities, as it affords the opportunity for young people to gather in a peer group in which they share a common language and socio-cultural experience. In other words, it lowers the social barriers to

entry into the parish youth ministry for young people who may feel different, isolated, or marginalized for any reason. At the same time, it provides multiple opportunities for teens to get involved in the parish throughout the week—which is great for families and young people with busy schedules.

In this model, the responsibilities of the YML and the core team are: to do pastoral planning for the whole youth community; to uphold the vision of youth ministry in all of the programs, ministries, and events; to provide leadership training and access to formation for coordinators and their teams of adult and adolescent leaders; and to collaborate on occasional events and activities for the whole parish youth community. The YML may also serve as the actual coordinator for one or more of the small communities or ministries, especially when the community of communities approach is getting started. Eventually the YML should hand off established ministries to volunteer coordinators in order to start new ministries that respond to local pastoral needs.

Diagram 2 illustrates this concept, with the core team in the middle and the various groups and communities extending out from the center—some more culturally diverse than others, depending on the language and pastoral needs addressed in each community. It is important to note that the various ministries and programs are not isolated from one another. Rather, they share a common vision, a common mission, and a common pastoral plan. In addition, they directly relate to and collaborate with one another on occasion, and they all provide a vehicle for young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, to grow in Christian maturity, and to insert themselves into the life, mission, and work of the Eucharistic community of communities, which is the parish.

Diagram 2: Youth Ministry in a Community of Communities



A Case Study: St. Matthew Catholic Church in Arlington, TX

In 1996, Ed Lozano was a volunteer Confirmation catechist, teaching a group of 12 high school students at his mostly-Hispanic parish in Arlington, TX—with no budget. About half way through the year, the young people in his group started to ask for more, indicating that they wanted a youth group to continue after Confirmation. By the next year, Ed had contacted the diocesan office of youth ministry in Fort Worth and received a basic certification in youth ministry. He immediately grasped the rich potential of a comprehensive model that included the eight components of Catholic youth ministry presented in *Renewing the Vision*, and began

to incorporate all eight into his work with the teens.

The next year Ed submitted a proposal to the pastor asking for a budget of \$16,000 to implement a comprehensive model of youth ministry. On his way to the finance council meeting, the pastor called Ed over and asked him, “Do you know that you are asking for an 800% increase in the amount of money we spend for teens?” Ed replied, “Father, you’ve had \$2,000 in the budget for the last eight years, and you’ve used none of it; I’m just asking for that money back”—and the request was approved. Once he came on staff in 1998, the first thing Ed did was to ask the parish office for a print-out of all the registered adolescents in the parish, ages 12 to 18; there were about 1,500 kids.

Ed recognized from the start that prayer and worship would be key to the success of his ministry. So in addition to the variety of musical and prayer experiences he was incorporating into regular sessions, he

organized an Ash Wednesday celebration of the Word conducted entirely by the teens as a ministry to their peers. He also initiated a Triduum retreat for young people that engaged them in an experience of the Paschal Mystery in a way that relates to contemporary life. Both events continue to this day and are immensely popular among the young people.

Similarly, leadership development has played a critical role in St. Matthew's accomplishments. In 2000, a group of teens from the parish attended the Center for Ministry Development's YouthLeader program³ and began to exercise leadership among their peers in multiple ways. Parents and other adults in the community also stepped forward for training and to participate in the ministry. The community of communities model simply does not work if the parish expects the paid YML to do everything and be everything for the young people—it is only when the whole parish community takes responsibility for the ministry that it is possible to increase the scale of programming to its full potential.

The youth ministry at St. Matthew started with sacramental preparation, and a broad understanding of catechesis and faith formation continues to be at the heart of the work that is done there. Today, St. Matthew provides First Communion preparation to about 200 junior high students each year (grades 6 to 8) who did not receive the sacrament at an earlier age. They are formed into groups of about 15 students with two adult catechists assigned to each, and at the end of their weekly Saturday morning sessions, they all come together for a large group prayer and worship experience that builds on the catechetical theme of the week. An additional 50 junior high students and about 60 ninth-graders are also receiving faith formation each week, although they are not preparing for any sacrament per se.

Because St. Matthew provides continuous opportunities for faith formation at every grade, a significant part of the 150 high school-age students attending Confirmation

classes (10th grade) come in with a basic or better knowledge of the faith and an honest desire to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. This has radically changed the spirit and culture of the Confirmation sessions, with young people taking the lead and setting the tone for the evangelization of their peers—many of whose families do not come to church regularly. In support of the Confirmation classes, faith formation is provided to parents in a series of four parent sessions, and monthly pot-lucks provide an opportunity for families to build community and share pointers for parenting adolescents.

Around 2000, Ed began going alternately to the Mexican American Cultural Center (now the Mexican American Catholic College⁴) and Instituto Fe y Vida's Summer Program⁵ every year. He knew that he needed to strengthen his pastoral vocabulary in Spanish and improve his outreach, especially to the immigrant youth, and these trainings provided a means to do that. Since 1998 Ed has been advising a *grupo juvenil* (peer ministry group of Spanish-speaking single young adults) called *Juntos con Jesús*. The group continues to this day with about 50 to 60 members, many of whom have also participated in Fe y Vida's training to enhance their leadership in this ministry to and with their peers, utilizing a variety of resources from Fe y Vida.

In 2002, the diocese invited St. Mary's Press to give a presentation on a new initiative called *Youth Engaging Scripture*. Ed participated in the training and soon grasped that *lectio divina* in the form of weekly reflection on the Sunday Scripture readings could enhance both faith formation and prayer and worship while building community among the young people. About that time he noticed that there were a number of teens wandering the parish halls on Thursday nights while the *grupo de oración* (a prayer group for about 300 adults in Spanish) was taking place. So he opened the doors to a teen Scripture study group,

which has evolved into four bilingual classrooms of junior high students and a pair of high school groups (mostly 9th graders), with about 15 youth in each class.

In 2004, Ed was approached by a group of four mothers who had recently immigrated from Mexico, and whose grade school-aged children were failing in school. He began to tutor them and was delighted to see their grades improving and their interest in school increasing. Ed recognized the need for advocacy on behalf of families in the public school system—especially when the parents do not speak English. He also saw the need for ongoing tutoring, so he contacted a local United Methodist ministry called Hope Tutoring⁶ and asked them if they would open a branch at St. Matthew. They did, and to this day tutoring has been incorporated into the pastoral care provided by the parish, and some of the parish youth participate as tutors for younger students as a form of service.

For many years, the parish *Quinceañera* program consisted of a several two-hour faith development sessions led by one of the deacons and his wife. Around 2005, Ed was doing some work on integrating an asset-building approach (Roehlkepartain, et al.) into his youth ministry, and he saw an opportunity to enrich the preparation of the girls and their families with a holistic developmental strategy that would complement the faith formation elements. Today, the program consists of five 4-hour sessions with the girls and their parents, in which the *quinceañeras* are given skills to be successful as teenagers and the parents receive tools to improve their relationship with their daughters and insights about how to guide them through adolescence. A team of young adult Latinas who have gone through the program now serve as presenters for this ministry.

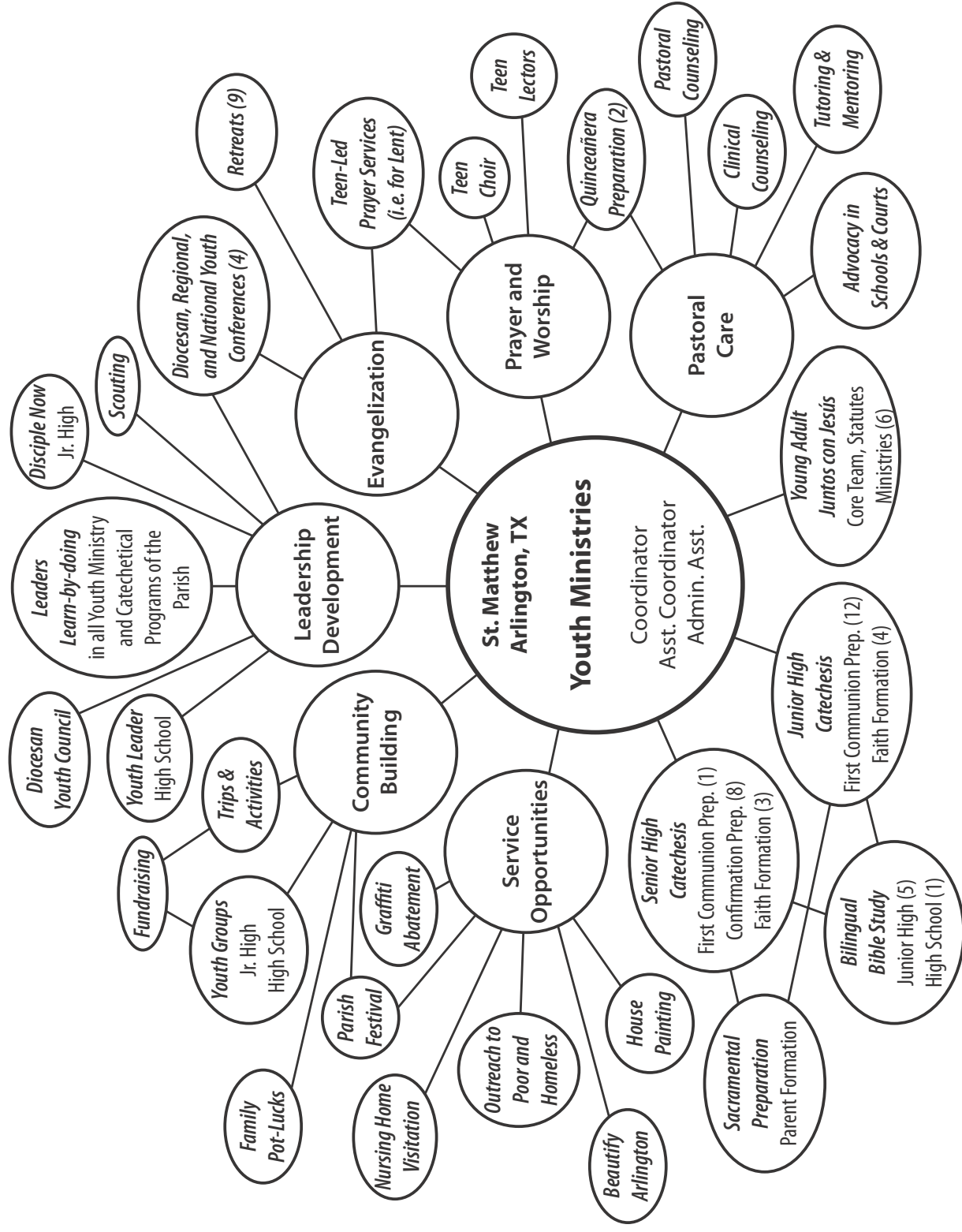
Much more could be written about the integration of the eight components in ministry at St. Matthew, but this is enough to give a sense of the approach and the process that has allowed youth ministry to flourish

there. In the 2012-2013 school year, Ed estimates that St. Matthew will serve a little more than 900 young people in the parish, with about 110 adult volunteers and more than 100 teen leaders contributing in some way to the 20+ programs and 50+ groups or classes in the various youth ministries. He describes this system as a comprehensive ministry that uses all eight components to reach out to the whole youth community of the parish, with many options for young people to connect and find their place. The parish now has a budget for a full-time youth minister, a part time assistant, and a part-time secretary. Clearly, this ministry did not develop overnight, but it is a wonderful example of what is possible when a comprehensive vision of youth ministry is implemented with a community of communities approach. Diagram 3 provides an organizational chart of St. Matthew's youth ministry as it stands today, with the number of groups, classes, or events in parentheses when applicable.

End Notes

- ¹ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html> (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ² Ken Johnson-Mondragón, "Catholic Youth and Young Adults in 2012," www.feyvida.org/research/catholic-youth-and-young-adults/ (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ³ See www.cmdnet.org/youth-ministry/youth-leader/program-overview (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁴ See www.maccsa.org (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁵ See www.feyvida.org/programs/summer.html (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁶ See www.hopetutoring.com/ (accessed March 15, 2013).

Diagram 3: Youth Ministry Programming at St. Matthew Catholic Church



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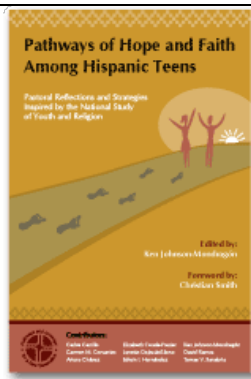
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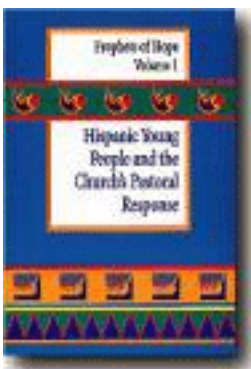
Resources from Instituto Fe y Vida



Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens: Pastoral Reflections and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion

Edited by Ken Johnson-Mondragón (Stockton: Instituto Fe y Vida)

Building on the largest national survey of teenage religion ever conducted, leading Catholic and Protestant experts recount in unprecedented detail the experiences of God, faith, community, youth ministry, and family among the fastest-growing segment of young people in the country—Latinos. Listen as young Hispanics describe their faith and hopes in their own words; gain understanding of the major issues affecting their religious development and life prospects; and improve your ministry or family life with insightful pastoral recommendations.



Witness of Hope Collection

Instituto Fe y Vida (www.feyvida.org/publications/witnesses.html)

The *Witnesses of Hope* collection, eight books organized into three series, lends strong support to ministry with Hispanic jóvenes (single young adults ages sixteen to thirty) by offering specialized resources for the development of small faith communities according to the *Prophets of Hope* Model. The model assumes and implements the goal of the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry to help Hispanic jóvenes to live and promote by means of a Pastoral de Conjunto a model of church that is: 1) communitarian, evangelizing, and missionary; 2) incarnate in the reality of the Hispanic people and open to the diversity of cultures; 3) a promoter and example of justice; 4) active in developing leadership by holistic education; and 5) leaven for the Kingdom of God in society.